

## [Flowing On]

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Approximately 3,000 words SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: FLOWING ON

Date of First Writing March 15, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed James Grigsby

Fictitious Name Jake Philpot

Street Address 2019 Bull Street

Place Columbia, S. C.

Occupation Collector

Name of Writer John L. Dove

Name of Reviser State Office

It was Monday morning, December 12, 1932, and the snow was silently falling on the streets of Columbia, South Carolina. The clang and swish of trolley cars went on as usual. There, too, was the roar of truck and auto traffic. Men, women, and children walked. In fact, there was an unusual amount of walking. Many walked because they could not ride; they were jobless.

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At the office of the big Congaree furniture store on Main Street, C. 10 S. C. Box, 2.

2

it was, indeed, blue Monday. The reception extended the job seeker there was as bleak as the day. Figuratively speaking, the manager needed help; some one with ability to keep the big electric sign, just above the entrance to the building, flashing the name, C-O-N-G-A-R-E-E.

Manager Bason of the Congaree was in a blue and ugly mood that morning. He had cut to the bone the store's overhead expense. The services of a number of collectors and one or more office workers had been discontinued. Salaries had been cut, and he had even begun to practice economy with the heating and lighting in the big three-story building. Just a small light here and there shined down upon the modern and expensive suites of furniture - fine merchandise - that the home owners would not or could not buy, even at bargain prices.

"Bam, bam, bam!" Manager Bason's big fist pounded on the desk before him, as he talked intently to the three collectors who stood nearby thumbing through stacks of bills. "We've got over \$100,000 worth of merchandise out on accounts among the people of Columbia, and yet our income is insufficient to meet our obligations. Unless you three men can collect \$20,000 and place it on this desk by January 1, you'll be as jobless as rabbits after a big snow storm. I tell you that because January 1, 1933, is the very last day the Congaree's creditors have agreed to wait for their money." The excited manager then turned to Jake Philpot, pointed a finger toward the street and said: "Philpot, go out there and squint until that amount comes into this store."

When Jake Philpot reached the sidewalk with his bulging billfold, he felt the chill of wet snow flakes on his face. He paused just long enough to view the traffic on the street. "Tramp, tramp, tramp," came the noise 3 of shoe heels pounding the wet sloppy sidewalks.

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He knew only too well that many of those walkers were hunting for jobs. But Jake Philpot had a real job, and he had to be on his way.

He opened the door of his battered car parked against the curb, tossed his billfold on the seat, climbed in, started the motor, and was off. He drove on and on through the falling snow, until he reached the big Pacific Mill village on the outskirts of the city. He stopped his motor on Whaley Street, the main thoroughfare in the mill village. There, again, he found men and women walking, and with worried looks on their faces. The only noise around that long five-story building was the maddening “tramp, tramp” of shuffling feet. The mill had suspended its operation indefinitely.

Jake Philpot began to walk. On and on he walked; he knew not where. “I have a job, yet I haven't anything to do but walk.” he thought aloud to himself. He walked, too, until he heard a voice singing. He paused in his tracks, leaned his head to one side, squinted his right eye, and listened to one singing the old familiar hymn: “He Will Carry You Through.”

“Will carry you through!” Jake Philpot repeated, as he resumed his walk in the direction from whence came the sound of that voice. He found the soloist to be that of a mill worker who lived in an humble cottage located on one of the back streets of the village. He knocked on the door. It was immediately opened, and there stood a mother with a crying - maybe hungry - child in her arms.

“Good morning, Mr. Philpot,” she said. Then, pointing to a comfortable chair, she added: “Won't you have that chair? I'm sorry we haven't any 4 more to offer you. The mill is not running and, consequently, we have no way of making a payment on the furniture. You can take it back if you need it.”

“Thanks, but I can't tarry longer than to tell you that you need not worry about your debt to the Congaree Furniture Company. The hymn that you have just sung has taken care of

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that. But tell me, Mrs. Roe, if you can, where I might go and find people who do not have to walk.”

Mrs. Roe thought for a moment, and then, pointing in an easterly direction, said: “Over there, during my sleepless nights, I can see the bright lights shining; and they ride.”

“The bright lights, and they ride!” Jake Philpot repeated over and over again, He understood. He straightened his blinking eyelids, set his head squarely on his shoulders, and made a dash for his old battered car. With a pop and a sputter, the old motor soon began to warm up to the task. Like a flash, Jake and the old car were on their way. The motor roared on through the falling snow until the glimmer of colored lights - Christmas lights - came into view in the fashionable Hollywood homes. He stopped against the curb, climbed out with the billfold under his arm, walked to the entrance of an apartment building, and pushed a doorbell. A well dressed lady opened the door and, after she had observed the bulging leather bag under Jake's arm, inquired: “What is it?”

“I wish to speak to Mrs. Turnbull,” answered Jake.

“Sorry, but Mrs. Turnbull doesn't live here anymore.”

Jake Philpot thought fast, and his squinting eye had just time to rest on the number on the telephone inside the hallway before the door closed in his face. He returned to the wet, sloughy street, but he did not stop walking until he had arrived at a corner drug store.

5

“May I use your telephone?” he asked the young soda jerker.

“Yes, sir.”

Jake Philpot dialed the number he had in mind. When the answer came, he said: “I wish to speak to Mrs. Turnbull.”

## Library of Congress

"Just a minute. Oh, Mrs. Turnbull! The telephone!" Jake heard and recognized the voice. A moment passed, and then:

"Mrs. Turnbull speaking."

"Just wanted to find out if you were in, Mrs. Turnbull, and could receive an important message. The carrier will be there in a few minutes."

"Why, yes, I'll be here, and I certainly thank you for being so nice as to call and tell me."

Jake Philpot retraced his steps and was soon back at the apartment building. Again he pushed the doorbell. And again he found himself in the presence of that well dressed lady. He said: "I wish to speak to Mrs. Turnbull."

"I've told you once, sir, that Mrs. Turnbull does not live here any more." Before she could slam the door in Jake Philpot's face, he replied, "Yes, I remember what you told me, but I happen to know that you didn't tell me the truth. I've just talked to Mrs. Turnbull over this telephone. Will you please be kind enough to ask her to come and receive a message?"

Just then Mrs. Turnbull, who had heard and seen it all, came forward to relieve the situation. She paid in full - \$200 - the amount she owed the Congaree Furniture Company.

According to Jake Philpot, it mattered not to him how many times they slammed doors in his face. It made him all the more determined to make them pay what they owed the Congaree. Time after time, he said, 6 they threatened him with physical or legal combat as a result of his cunningness and audacity. He invaded home after home in that fine residential section of the city, in an effort to make them pay what they owed the Congaree. If they had influential guests, or if they had a fashionable party under way in the home, Jake entered and announced: "We need that balance you owe the Congaree."

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After his right eye had fallen into a squint, Jake explained his methods in dealing with the "highbrows," as he called them. "I gave them no opportunity to 'button-hole' me, shunt me to the shadows, and whisper an excuse in my ear, or sell me an alibi. I made them play 'Andy's puttin' on the dog,' while I stood in the presence of the 'big shots' they had around and wrote receipts in full for the piles of money they 'forked over' in order to get rid of me, an uninvited and totally unappreciated guest.

"When I'd get home at night to my little house out in Camp Fornance section of the city, it would oftentimes be 4:00 a.m. I'd be so tired, I wouldn't lie down to sleep, I'd fall down."

When asked if he managed to receive sleep sufficient to enable him to stand the strain of such a drive, he replied: "Oh, yes, I sleep with the social elect. And while they play, I work." By that, he meant he arranged his daily schedule so as to be up and about his duties as a collector while the people of a social turn of mind played.

While Jake Philpot never boasts of an accomplishment, or complains of hardship, he merely squints and relates a few of his experiences connected with the peculiar task he undertook during that trying period. He did, however, do what his boss had asked - "get out there and squint" until he collected. He could be seen pushing doorbell after doorbell in 7 the fine residential sections of the city at night. During the daylight hours, he could be seen climbing staircases in tall office buildings; crawling from grimy boiler rooms; entering gambling halls, bootleg joints, and houses of ill fame. It mattered not to him what people thought of him or said to him, he only squinted and entertained one thought - a running Congaree.

When Manager Bason looked up from the column of figures on his desk and saw the clock ticking away in his office, it was eleven o'clock. Two collectors had reported and were sitting near the big heater in the office, nodding. They were tired and sleepy. Nothing had been heard from Jake Philpot in three days.

## Library of Congress

"Oh, what's the use? It's impossible!" Manager Bason complained as he began stumbling over the little walnut and mahogany whatnots on the floor. He had smoked cigarette after cigarette, and the stubs were lying scattered here and there. He was groggy, and it was with a stagger that he walked.

The clock ticked on, and Manager Bason continued his staggering walk from front door to office and back again. From time to time, a smoke stand, a beautiful mirror, or some expensive doofunny would topple and fall from contact with his fist or hand. Great beads of sweat had begun to show on his face. The clock ticked on, but Jake Philpot was not there. When the long hand neared the figure twelve on the dial, Manager Bason said: "It's all over." Just as he reached for the switch to stop the big electric sign on the front of the building, the door opened. It was Jake Philpot. For a moment, Jake stood with a little brown bag in his hand and a squint in his eye. Manager Bason lowered his upraised hand and inquired:

"Did you get it, Philpot?" 8 "I don't know, sir," Jake answered, as he handed the little brown bag to his boss. It required only a moment's time for Manager Bason to learn that the balance needed was in that bag. Just as he was closing the heavy vault door in the office, the radio announcer said: "Happy New Year!" It was then one minute past twelve o'clock, on the morning of January 1, 1933, and bedlam had broken loose in the city. Guns fired, bells rang, car horns honked, and people cried and shouted. But Jake Philpot heard none of it, for he snored all the while on one of the soft beds in the Congaree.

While Jake Philpot slept, his boss, Manager Bason, celebrated with the crowds on the street. He was happy. While speaking of the matter years later, Mr. Bason said: "That night furnished the happiest, as well as the host horrible hours of my life." He gives Jake Philpot full credit for the light, C-O-N-G-A-R-E-E, that has never failed. Jake credited it to the account of the kind lady he heard singing - "For He Will Carry You Through" - that damp gloomy day in the Pacific Mill village when the snow flakes were falling thick and fast.

## Library of Congress

Jake Philpot was born February 8, 1870, on a little two-horse farm on Twenty Creek in Fairfield County, South Carolina. He is the son of James and Cora Philpot, whose parents came from Virginia. They were for many years members of Zion Methodist Church in the Bear Creek Community. They say that Mr. and Mrs. Philpot, Jake's parents, seldom missed a sermon at Zion. They required Jake and his five brothers and four sisters to attend preachings and Sunday School at Zion.

When Jake Philpot was seven years old, he started his education at Duke - a little one-room, one-teacher school near Twenty Creek. The old school building, he said, is still standing.

9

"Not long ago, I was at Duke and found a few landmarks I saw there fifty years ago when I was a student," remarked Mr. Philpot. He reached no further than about the seventh grade, including his education at Duke or elsewhere. His parents died when he was seventeen, and then Jake was left on his own. He had to work for a living.

He came to Columbia in 1888 and lived for a number of years with a married sister and her family. During that time, he sold newspapers on the streets of the city and was delivery boy for the John L. Mimnaugh store. His first regular job was obtained at the old State dispensary, at one dollar a day. He pasted labels on whiskey bottles for two years. "But I never touch strong drink," he casually remarked.

In 1903, Jake Philpot started his career as a furniture man, working first with the Van Meter store and then with P. O. Roberts & Company. In 1913, he became connected with the parent firm of the present Congaree Furniture Company, as a collector-salesman. For thirty years, he has pushed doorbells at fine homes and rapped on doors of many who could not afford doorbells. While he tells little about himself, he is rich in experience. He goes among the people and among his firm's customers in his quiet unassuming way. It matters not how humble the home, Jake is ever ready and willing to extend a friendly



## Library of Congress

word and a helping hand. There is perhaps no one in Columbia who has come in contact with more joys and sorrows than "Old Jake Philpot." When he is confronted with a real problems he usually squints until he sees a solution to that problem.

Not so long ago, he was asked when and how he acquired the habit of squinting his right eye and leaning his head to one side while listening to a conversation. To this, he replied: "When I was a boy on our little 10 Twenty Creek farm, there was a six-acre cottonfield that extended from the back yard of the house to the northern boundary of the farm. I hoed and plowed cotton in that field. When the noon hour approached, I'd watch the shadow of a tall pine that stood in the front yard. When that shadow reached a certain point on the house, I knew it would be around 12 o'clock, time to quit for the refreshment I knew Mother had prepared. In looking at that shadow, the summer sun would beam down in my face so strongly that I'd have to hold my head to one side and squint." Thus it was that Jake acquired the habit of squinting while thinking intently about a problem confronting him.

In February, 1890, Jake Philpot married Miss Margaret Epting of Camden, South Carolina. They have reared and educated four children - three girls and one boy - of whom he speaks:

"I'm proud of them all, and I believe they will not forget the one thing that has been my pillow and guide through the years. I mean that line in the old hymn - He Will Carry You Through - which I used to hear my mother sing while I toiled in that six-acre cottonfield just north of the house where I watched the pine's shadow.

Despite the falling snow, the pouring rain, the cold and the heat of winter, spring, summer and fall, Jake Philpot keeps pushing doorbells, and rapping where there are no bells, as a collector for the Congaree. He weighs just 135 pounds; is gray-haired; is without his original teeth; but his five feet of manhood and courage are still with him. Like the Congaree, he flows on.